

COIN Symposium, Conference Report

The US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center hosted Counterinsurgency (COIN) Symposium with special emphasis on COIN in Afghanistan from May 11-13, 2010, Fort Leavenworth. Twelve featured speakers and 120-plus attendees discussed COIN theory and best practices coming from the field in Afghanistan. The purpose was to identify common themes for inclusion in pre-deployment training and professional military and interagency education curricula.

This report contains the common themes immediately below and more detailed summaries of each speaker's presentation farther down.

Symposium participants showed a great deal of consensus on the following common themes:

- Partnering is CRITICAL to success!
 - Partnering enhances the capabilities of both ISAF and ANSF units—they have complementary strengths.
 - Partnering makes the population feel safer, increasing support for ISAF efforts and, more importantly, enhancing the legitimacy of Afghan institutions at all levels.
 - Partnering builds the capacity of Afghan institutions such that ISAF/NATO can disengage and leave a functioning Afghan state.
 - Missing an opportunity to partner is missing an opportunity to succeed.
- Personal relationships are critical to tactical and operational success in Afghanistan. Afghan culture demands the formation of a relationship based on individual honor before representatives of different groups—ISAF and Afghani—can cooperate or negotiate.
 - Technology, such as UAVs, precision munitions, close air support, and other technical enablers, is no substitute for face-to-face, person-to-person contact. The former is no good without the latter.
- Other key aspects of Afghan culture and history include:
 - Afghans' central government has usually been weak, and has rarely controlled the behavior or successfully interfered in the affairs of the diverse tribes and ethnic groups which compose Afghanistan.
 - The ethnic diversity of Afghans inhibits the formation of a national identity.
 - Religious leaders, particularly extremists, have not always heavily influenced political events in Afghanistan. The relative strength of the influence religious leaders now have stems from events occurring during the Soviet war.
 - Afghans have a warrior culture—almost all males carry weapons routinely. A man with a weapon is not odd, and likely has no violent intent.

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- That said, Afghans are more likely to resolve disputes violently. Stay Alert!
 - Afghans are warriors, but a good warrior does not automatically make a good soldier.
 - Afghans will not normally choose to fight to the death; they will fight and disperse to fight another day.
 - Afghans are pragmatic. Their loyalty can be “rented” but switching sides is not unusual.
- The tactical/operational environment changes rapidly. Soldiers must be adaptive—ready to take advantage of or respond to changes in the environment that may be incidental to allied activities. Soldiers must be able to switch rapidly from “hard COIN” to “soft COIN” and back as the situation dictates.
- Experience is teaching that soldiers must understand that shooting is not the best solution to many COIN problems.
 - The key maxim is that “minimum force, precisely applied, is usually best.”
 - Also, a well-aimed rifle bullet is much cheaper than a precision munition, which prevents counterinsurgents’ fiscal exhaustion and decreases the likelihood of collateral damage.
 - Inculcating an attitude of “think before we shoot” is a command issue and must begin very early in the training cycle or it will not be successful.
 - A commander must engage early and often in a “targeted imposition of will” to ensure that his intent pervades his unit.
 - Lethal operations are “performance art”—the influence outcome of a lethal operation is more important who was captured, killed or wounded.
- The “insurgency” is not monolithic. Some estimates conclude that only about 20% of “Taliban” are ideologically committed to the Taliban cause.
- In fact, there are many local insurgencies, some of which might be defused with the right personal relationship.
- Afghan “democracy” might not look like Westerners expect. One participant described a local jirga as “Greek-style democracy” and as the “most pure” democracy that he had ever witnessed. What works for them may not look like what works for us.
- Indeed, Afghan solutions to all sorts of problems might not be what the coalition would prefer—but they might still work.
 - Solutions Afghans “own” are more likely to enlist their support.

- Stabilization has always been a military task. The “whole-of-government” approach, while desirable, has never actually worked because civilian interagency partners have never had the capacities to do what the military hopes they would do.
 - Implication: Military organizations cannot do without stability know-how.
- A growing body of anecdotal evidence indicates that population-centric COIN works at low levels—people will choose peace and prosperity when they are allowed a say in their own development.
 - Interagency or, at least, multidisciplinary COIN works at the grassroots—improving security makes “soft COIN” possible.
 - Security and good governance = success.
- Afghan perceptions of ISAF and GIRoA efforts are key—**the Afghan people decide if we are successful!**
 - Well-targeted and timely information operations can influence perceptions and create success.
- Not unfounded popular perceptions of GIRoA inefficiency and corruption create a COIN challenge—the issue is not the attractiveness of Taliban ideology, but the lack of effective governance.
 - Corollary 1: The **problem** is not military in nature; it is political.
 - Corollary 2: The **solution** is not military in nature; it is political.
- Tribal engagement strategies offer important opportunities for progress. They also create “centrifugal forces” that pull against the centralization of GIRoA authority that will need careful consideration (read MAJ Gant’s summary below for details).
- Civilian casualties and Afghans’ perceptions of ISAF’s concern for their well-being are critical to ISAF’s success. Soldiers must be willing to assume tactical risk—choosing sometimes not to shoot—to protect civilian lives or ISAF will fail.

Summaries of each speaker’s key points are below:

Dr. Lester Grau

Soviet COIN in Afghanistan

- Afghan central state has usually been weak, and the population is diverse which inhibits the formation of a national identity.
- Some key results of the Soviet war:
 - Empowerment of religious leaders at the expense of traditional and modern secular leadership.
 - Educated and moderate Afghans fled the country.

- Tribal structure has been deformed by refugee experience.
- Things the Soviets did right:
 - Effective use of agent networks.
 - Educated thousands of Afghans in the Soviet Union.
 - KGB and GRU Advisors were well-educated on Afghan languages and cultures.
- Things the Soviets did wrong:
 - Over-reliance on air-power and technology.
 - Imposed Soviet-appropriate training on Afghan armed forces.
 - Took over responsibilities from the people they were advising.

COL Gian Gentile (U.S. Army)

Another Perspective on COIN in Afghanistan

- Population-centric COIN doctrine needs fundamental revision.
- Key problems with doctrine as expressed in FM 3-24:
 - Based on examination of 1950s and 1960s experience with Maoist model insurgencies.
 - Assumes cause and effect relationships between COIN activities and environmental outcomes that are not well-substantiated.
 - Espouses a one-way only approach to COIN (large-scale population-centric approach).
- The Army's current fixation on COIN is a "straightjacket" that prevents thinking about alternative models of irregular conflict and, more importantly, encourages the atrophy of combined arms warfare skills.
- The Army is seduced by a promise that COIN and nation-building can result in strategic success within a reasonable time.
- The success of the "surge" in Iraq (2007) was more complicated than the "narrative" admits. This means that COIN success is not guaranteed by doing COIN in accordance with FM 3-24.
- Our COIN "strategy" is really a strategy of tactics that does not best serve America's 21st century security interests.

Editor's Note: COL Gentile's ideas are more fully developed in "A Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army," *Parameters*, Autumn 2009, pp. 5-17.

Dr. Daniel Marston

COIN in Afghanistan

- The military needs to train officers, NCOs, soldiers to adapt with the situation as it evolves.
 - Use lethal operations to establish security as necessary, but be ready to increase non-lethal efforts as changing conditions with population and insurgent activity allow.
- ISAF has inherent problems:
 - Member nations cannot agree on objectives.

- Mission is to impose a centralized, democratic government on a country not prepared for it by history.
- “Taliban” is our name for the insurgency, but insurgent groups are not homogenous—perhaps only 20% are ideologically committed to Taliban’s goals; some are self-interested spoilers.
- Key ISAF members may be “getting better at COIN” (when to shoot/not-shoot), but how will ANSF deal with insurgents after ISAF leaves, when they themselves are struggling to learn basic security tasks?
- ANA may not be up to “holding” cleared areas; soldiers not of the local ethnic group are “foreigners;” Pashtuns may see the ANA as rebranded Northern Alliance.
- ANP often perceived as corrupt and inefficient.
- Advocates smaller, better quality force as opposed to 400,000-man ANSF as soon as possible.
- “Partnering” with ANSF is also about passing along the COIN lessons we have learned in the last several years.

Dr. R. Scott Moore

Counterinsurgency: The Civ-Mil Question

- “Complex operations” is the politically correct term for US actions in conflict/post-conflict environments. Civilian (US interagency) organizations would not participate willingly in any activity under the terms, “war” or “warfare.”
- COIN strategic paths historically are:
 - Defeat the insurgent militarily- often failed or resulted in repression and occupation.
 - Resolve the underlying causes of the insurgency- more likely to achieve long-term stability. Success often required more than 10 years of significant effort.
- The history of US interventions in complex environments shows that the “whole of government” approach has never actually worked. Military has always done the vast majority of reconstruction tasks.
- US interagency civilian organizations lack capacity to add greatly to COIN or reconstruction efforts. They provide expertise and sometimes funding.
- Transitions occur between US/multi-national military organizations and local national institutions, not between military and US/international civilian organizations.

Lt Col Rupert Jones (British Army)

British Armed Forces and COIN in Afghanistan

- COIN is not easy, and troops will fall back on warfighting skills when in contact.
- We need to better understand the value of money and target our resources to achieve the desired effect.

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- We need to break our “dependency culture” on fires where soldiers are given supporting fires as a default. We need to win engagements smarter using maneuver.
 - Limits the collateral damage which would damage our relationships with local populace.
 - Reduces expenditure of very expensive systems which makes the COIN effort more sustainable.
 - Ensures psychological advantage over the insurgent – key in a clash of wills.
- Progress is being made:
 - Increasing continuity of effort.
 - Partnering with ANSF giving both forces increased effectiveness.
 - Population feels safer.
- Coordinated effort to resource Protected Communities now making progress and giving the population greater confidence in GIRoA.

COL Roch Lacroix (Canadian Army)

Canadian Armed Forces and COIN in Afghanistan

- Canadian forces are seeking unity of thought, purpose and action—goal is to leave an Afghanistan which is better governed, more peaceful and secure, and more prosperous.
- Forces engaged in lines of operation associated with security, governance and development.
 - Important gains in security where ISAF is operating—insurgents remain potent in uncontested areas.
 - Governance efforts focused on registration for elections and establishment of Election Complaints Commission.
 - Multi-faceted development effort in essential services, healthcare, education, etc.
- Most persistent threat to ISAF goals and population’s welfare is the lack of effective, accountable government—corruption and self-interested officials do great damage to government’s cause.
- Popular loyalty follows traditional patterns—family, clan, tribe, business networks, and maybe province or nation.
- Canadian forces experienced success in a “village approach”—reconstruction on a small scale stressing principles of Afghan ownership, sustainability, realistic expectations, unity of effort and demonstrable effect.
 - 300 village elders took initiative to discourage Taliban activity due to focused Afghan/Coalition efforts. Engagement model was working.

Lt Col Christian Cabaniss (USMC)

USMC and COIN in Afghanistan- Thoughts on Operations in the Helmand River Valley

- Every village and district is different.
- COIN mindset includes:
 - Everything is by, with, and through Afghans.
 - Afghans decide if we are being successful.
 - COIN is a verb, i.e. “let’s get out there and COIN them!”
- Planning is by warfighting function—integrated at the company level and below.
 - Intel takes time to become effective.
 - Logistics drive operations.
 - Commander needs to abandon the “illusion of control.”
 - Maneuver fight is decentralized and distributed.
 - Info operations must be timely and consistent with behavior.
- Commander’s intent is established early and often in the training cycle to allow time for commander’s perspectives to pervade the organization—it is a “targeted imposition of will.”
- Relationships with local people are keys to success.
 - 2-8 Marines attacked the insurgent network “by accident,” by building relationships at all levels.
 - Local population plays the most critical role in force protection.
 - In Garmsir, 2-8 Marines and ANSF won over the locals in the northern portion of the District, who rejected (ejected!) the Taliban, and then reinforced governance systems consistent with local tradition.

MAJ Jim Gant (U.S. Army)

Tribal Engagement in Afghanistan

- Tribal engagement has risks, but the potential advantages outweigh the risks.
- Current strategy is failing because:
 - It requires shoring up a national government widely perceived as corrupt and inefficient.
 - There are too few NATO and Afghan forces to carry out the strategy.
 - The population opposes centralized government interfering in their affairs.
 - NATO military knowledge of Pashtun people and culture is insufficient.
- Empowering tribes advances US interests:
 - Pashtun tribes often shelter and support “Taliban” insurgents.
 - Many “Taliban” are disgruntled Pashtuns, and are not committed to Taliban ideology.
 - Tribes can persuade moderate insurgents to forego insurgency.
 - Tribal influence can reach into Pakistan where we cannot.
- Tribes will contend with the national state—perhaps violently; tribal engagement allows us a hand in shaping this future.

- Personal relationships forged by living and fighting together drive influence over tribal activities.

LCol Bertrand Cadour (NATO)

Allied Transformation Command- NATO

- NATO has formed task force to draft doctrine and to derive training requirements for NATO forces deploying to Afghanistan.
- Difficulties arise from the differing perspectives, traditions, and policies of individual member nations.
- NATO desires to develop common approach to COIN doctrine and training to increase capabilities and standardize requirements to meet COMISAF training guidance.
- NATO desires to “institutionalize” COIN knowledge within NATO.

MAJ Jerry Crigger (USAF)

USAF and COIN in Afghanistan- Aviation Foreign Internal Defense

- Air Force has a foreign internal defense (FID) mission to train and build the capacities of allies’ air forces—assess, train, advise, assist, and integrate.
- Aviation capacity requires more time and money to build than ground capacity.
- US-made aircraft (e.g., UH-60, C-130) may not be optimal for foreign air forces with less institutional capacity for sustainment.
- USAF advisory role is younger than Army or Marine advisory roles, and is still under development.
- Afghan Air Force faces important challenges:
 - Education levels are very low.
 - English is official aviation language, but English skills are poor.
 - Aircrews are relatively old, and the pipeline is just being built to provide long term sustainment of aircrew.
 - Equipment is still being procured.
 - There are too few coalition advisors.

COL Joe Felter (U.S. Army)

COIN Advisory and Assistance Team (CAAT)

- CAAT observes, assesses and reports on COIN activities and assists commanders at all levels to enable integrated COIN operations.
- Cornerstones of ISAF campaign:
 - Focus on the population.
 - Support local governance—district and below.
 - Partner at every level.
- Reduction of civilian casualties (CIVCAS) critical to NATO success.

- CIVCAS undermines NATO's claim to protect the people and increases resistance to NATO activities and goals.
 - An increase in CIVCAS, regardless of cause, is correlated to an increase in violence.
 - Effective insurgent propaganda campaign will blame NATO for CIVCAS whether or not NATO is responsible.
- Partnering is critical to allied success—if you are not doing it, you are failing in your mission.
- Partnering builds local national capacities that will result in NATO's ability to transition to local national control and disengage.
- Partnering adds capabilities to NATO units that make both NATO and ANSF more effective.

MAJ Jason Adair (Canadian Army)

UAVs and COIN- Personalizing an Impersonal Weapon

- UAV lessons learned in population-centric COIN environment are still applicable across the spectrum of conflict.
- UAV employment reduces risk of “bad” air strikes causing unnecessary collateral damage.
- UAV employment supports activities on the ground.
- Optimal UAV use demands a nuanced understanding of the environment that can only be gained by face-to-face interaction with the population—it is not a substitute for human interaction.
- UAV use influences the manner in which the enemy fights.
- Distinguished between “succeed” and “win”—success is tied to the will of the Afghan people. We do not win something as a result of a fight, we succeed when a favorable outcome is reached.